

WITNESSING A POTENT TRUTH

WITNESSING A POTENT TRUTH: RETHINKING RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THEISMS

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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ABSTRACT

For Ahmadi Muslims in the Indian town of Qadian, a major part of ethical behaviour is the cultivation of a relationship of subordination to potent religious truths. This involves both manifesting and witnessing the truth of their religion in the form of polemical arguments and religious travel. I argue that understanding how moral character develops out of such a relationship requires us to turn our analytical attention away from agency and toward responsibility. Such a move has important implications for the more general anthropological study of theisms.

This article is an exploration of an ethical project in which virtue is nurtured through a very specific relationship to truth. It focuses upon members of the Ahmadiyya Community in India – a group whose Muslim identity is frequently contested or denied by others – to examine how they conceptualize their own (ever disputed) *Muslimness*

as a question of being the kind of person who is able to witness truth as present in divine proofs and polemical arguments. Witnessing has always been central to Islam: the martyr, or *shahid*, is the supreme witness to the religion, while the declaration of faith is referred to as the *shahada*, an act of testimony. This article follows recent anthropological attempts to probe the ethical complexities of being a witness (e.g. Mittermaier 2011; Segal 2015). For the Ahmadis, to be a witness means positioning oneself in a relationship to truth such that one can attribute something of one's own ethical formation to it. In short, this is the study of an ethical project that involves subordinating the self to a higher truth and attempting to thus live a life that is wholly ordered by this subordination.

This state of affairs raises an interesting analytical problem, which can more generally be observed in anthropological accounts of theisms. This is the question of how we should write about agency in the context of the relationships people have to a metaphysical other. If we follow the lead of much recent anthropology and make agency the centrepiece of our argument, then we end up with an analysis that either privileges an inward-facing self-cultivating individual, or we attribute agency to metaphysical others in such a way that we lose sight of what is actually ethical about people's actions. I suggest that neither of these approaches can illuminate my ethnography of Qadian, which is best understood through an analytical focus not on agency, but on how individuals assign responsibility (Laidlaw 2010).

Focusing on responsibility in this way reveals that coherent moral character in Qadian is seen to emerge from a person's fidelity to performing and witnessing truth. Within recent ethnographies of Muslims, there has been some debate about whether it is possible to live a singular life of disciplined cohesion (Janson 2014; Marsden 2009a; Schielke 2009; Simon 2009). I suggest that the ethical project I observed in Qadian – of completely subordinating the self to a potent truth – is liable to be misread unless we begin to move away from a vocabulary of agency in our study of moral character.

THE AHMADIYYA JAMA'AT

This article is based on 15 months of fieldwork in Qadian, India, birthplace of the Ahmadiyya *Jama'at* (community) and its founder, the self-proclaimed prophet and Messiah, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (c.1830s – 1908). Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's followers – Ahmadis – claim not to be propagating a new form of Islam, but instead returning to the authentic version of Islam first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. For many other Muslims in Pakistan, India, and just about everywhere else, however, Ahmadis are the paradigmatic modern unbelievers. The exclusion of the Ahmadis from the body politic of South Asian Islam has its roots in complex historical, social and theological processes. For those in Qadian, however, there is a simple explanation; Mirza Ghulam

Ahmad was a true prophet of Islam and, they argue, all true prophets face rabid opposition.

Ahmad first gained public attention in Punjab in a period of intense religious debate, when many new sects were emerging, and religious-community lines were being codified. From the late 1880s, he was heavily involved in the polemical defence of his version of Islam against other Muslim reformers, Christian missionaries, and Hindu activists (Friedmann 2003). The title of Ghulam Ahmad's most important work, *Barahin-e-Ahmadiyya*, translates as *Arguments or Proofs* of Ahmadiyya, and in it he claims to present "300 incontrovertible rational arguments" (Ahmad 2012: 74) in support of Islam. The need for this, Ahmad explains, is that "the pitch darkness that has engulfed the world will only be dispelled when a vast number of proofs in support of Islam enlighten the world and the rays of its truth spread in all directions" (Ahmad 2012: 79). Ahmad's major prophetic labour was thus the delivery of arguments in favour of his own prophethood in a language that he over and again insisted was rational, and in a manner that drew upon multiple sources of evidential truth, among them revelatory, archaeological, scriptural, and historical. For many of my interlocutors, the most complete demonstration of this faculty was Ahmad's use of multiple sources of evidence to prove that Jesus escaped death on the cross, passed through Asia to India, and died a natural death in Kashmir (Ahmad 2008). The tract in which Ahmad made this argument established the

theological groundwork for his own claim to be a Promised Messiah distinct from Jesus.

Since Ahmad's death (1908), the *Jama'at* has been led by a Caliph, or *Khalifa*, the present *Khalifa* being the fifth incumbent of this role¹. A central theme of official history under Caliphate, or *Khilafat*, is the *Jama'at's* supposed rapid expansion to over 200 countries and its newfound visibility in the form of its global Satellite TV channels. By spreading globally, the *Jama'at* has, for believers, come to fulfil Ahmad's prophecies of success: it has become a marvel to witness.

Ahmad lived most of his life in the Punjabi town of Qadian. During Partition (1947), Qadian fell narrowly within India, and after a protracted but ultimately failed attempt to keep the community headquarters there, the majority of Ahmadis left for Pakistan². A small contingent of men remained to protect the graves of Ghulam Ahmad and the other holy sites of the town. The present Ahmadi population of Qadian remain a minority at roughly 4000 of the town's 22,000 population³.

Those Ahmadis who moved to Pakistan – the majority of the community – have suffered significant persecution, and in 1984 during the rule of General Zia, a legal ordinance was promulgated which established by law that Ahmadis are non-Muslim, and thus 'effectively criminalized their everyday life' (Khan 2012: 108). The ordinance

added two new clauses (298 B and C) to the Penal Code, making certain names, titles, and practices exclusive to Muslims. If the Ahmadis act, talk or behave 'like Muslims', for example, if they describe their places of worship as mosques, they can be imprisoned for up to three years for 'posing' as a Muslim. Since 1984, the *Khilafat* has been based, in exile, in Southfields, London. The majority of the *Jama'at's* followers and its bureaucratic structure remain in Pakistan, although increasingly, media operations have been moved to the UK, where a small but vocal community reside.

This paper, however, focuses closely upon the group who remain in Qadian. It is about how Qadian's Ahmadis claim to live lives structured by recognition of the truth of the *Jama'at*.

DOCUMENTABLE TRUTHS

Once a year in late December, Qadian is transformed by the *Jalsa Salana*, or Annual Gathering. The street running through the Muslim neighbourhood is divided by a central barrier, so that throngs of men and women may move through the town without mixing, and two arenas, each capable of seating thousands of people, are constructed so that the genders may gather separately⁴. Almost every able-bodied Ahmadi resident in Qadian is engaged by a specific duty for several weeks as the town is swelled by up to 25,000 guests from across India and the world. Hosting these guests is a huge and daunting task for the

small Ahmadi population, and the yearly calendar of the town is organized around this gigantic and divinely ordained task. Not only are Ahmadis expected to attend, but all members of the *Jama'at* who earn money must pay 1/120th of their yearly income to support this gathering. Nowadays, *Jalsa Salanas* are held in every country in which Ahmadis are to be found in large numbers, but the Qadian *Jalsa* is the original event.

Qadian is transformed for the three days of the *Jalsa*. Family reunions occur, old friends catch up, and the overwhelming feeling that my interlocutors reported was of a spiritual atmosphere in which one could visibly witness the success of the *Jama'at*. For many, the most significant feature of the Qadian *Jalsa* is the arrival of up to 5000 Pakistanis who are granted visas specifically for this event. Since 1984 the Government of Pakistan has refused the community permission to hold their own *Jalsa Salanas*, and many of the youngest Pakistanis have never attended one before. For both Pakistanis and Indians this becomes a chance to create new bonds of friendship and acquaintance with those normally separated by an impermeable border.

The experiential potency of the *Jalsa*, however, is not just a product of its liminal status. As my interlocutors guided me through the *Jalsa*, they also sought to train my eye upon several key features. Most importantly, they encouraged me to witness the disciplined behaviour of all those in attendance; the lack of quarrels, the sense of order as

everybody followed the rules and the system which regulated this. This is not a peculiarity of Qadian: a general guide for worldwide *jalsa* etiquette describes how the correct ordered form of the event is to be achieved, and instructs attendees to “try to portray the true and beautiful image of the Jamaat to outsiders, especially our neighbors”⁵. The result is an exemplary image of harmony and coherence, the witnessing of which produces a feeling of intense spirituality and intoxication both for those in attendance and those watching the events as they are broadcast live on the community satellite TV channel. Where else in the world, several people asked me, could you find such a large group of people behaving so peacefully? But this peacefulness mattered not because it was peaceful *per se* but because it indexed a broader truth about the *Jama’at*. The following example will help to elucidate this.

In December 2010 I had just attended my first *Jalsa* in Qadian. I had been in the town only a few weeks, when I found myself in a conversation with a teacher from the Ahmadi theological college in Pakistan. We were walking through the market, freely exploring the town, a space that was strangely familiar and yet disconcerting for many of the Pakistanis I met, for it was a Punjab that was not dominated by Islam, but was instead a place of heterogeneous faiths and ‘false idols’. This teacher, only just qualified as a cleric, engaged me in fluent and confident English on the topic of *shirk*, or idolatry.

Did I, as somebody from a Christian country, really believe in the Trinity, he asked? I didn't, but I could see that my interlocutor desired the sport of debating, so I played devil's advocate with a long-forgotten Christian belief system, while he tried to convince me of the logical superiority of the Ahmadi interpretation of Islam. The Ahmadis, he explained, are the only extant community who believe in continuing divine revelation and contact with God. Replying to this, I told the young teacher that some Charismatic Christians I know back in the UK very much believe that they can communicate with God, and what is more, see prophesy, revelation, and divinely inspired dreams - in sum, all those things that my informant had claimed were exclusive to Ahmadiyyat - as part of the everyday fabric of their lives. My interlocutor was surprised by this, and pressed me further on the issue.

"But do they have prophecies which they write down, which they publish?" he asked me.

"I don't know" I replied, then remembering another example said, "but I know that there often has to be documented proof of a miracle for a Catholic Saint to be created."

Yet my interlocutor remained unconvinced, and again asked the same question, "but do they publish their prophecies?"

For this interlocutor, the wondrous quality of prophetic dreams was explicitly linked to their documentability. I had expected dreams to be ethical because of their experiential qualities and yet over and over again, it was made clear that what really mattered was the way in which dreams afforded a vantage point from which to witness a particular kind of empirically verifiable truth. The same thing was true for my previous example about the *Jalsa*; it created wonder not just because of its liminal qualities, but because it was a visible, documentable, display of discipline that indexed the truth of Ahmadiyyat. For the Ahmadis with whom I spent the next fifteen months, recorded dreams, the arguments of their sect, the exemplary figures they look up to, and the very system of the *Jama'at* – that is, the worldwide bureaucratic structure spanning 200 countries – were the paradigmatic empirical proofs of revelation.

THE PERFORMANCE AND WITNESSING OF TRUTH

The truths of Ahmadiyyat are said to be so potent that they are capable of reducing opponents to silence, and stories circulate in Qadian that attest to this. One particular tale concerned the book *Revelation, rationality, knowledge and truth* by the Fourth *Khalifa* (Ahmad 1998), which is widely admired by Ahmadis for being a defence of the existence of God using the tools of science. The *Jama'at* is said to have sent copies of this book to many hundreds of atheist scientists, including Richard Dawkins, along with a challenge to disprove the

arguments that it contained. During one retelling of this story, an interlocutor jubilantly concluded that, “not one scientist was able to send a response!” I questioned him further, asking whether it was possible that the scientists did not read the book. My interlocutor did not agree, and becoming perturbed by my inability to immediately grasp the forcefulness of Ahmadi argumentation, he explained that scientists enjoy reading books, and their lack of response must have been down to their inability to argue back.

As we shall see in the coming section, both performing and witnessing proofs⁶ is central to being a good Ahmadi. Everyday religious discourse in Qadian is filled with stories of opponents who were bested in argument by Ahmadi missionaries, or of fierce adversaries who, upon coming across the incontrovertible proofs of Ahmadiyyat, would be so overcome by their own inability to respond that they would at once convert. Above all, there is an everyday pride – evidenced by the repeated telling of stories such as that about the scientists – that the truths of Ahmadiyyat are unlike the truths of other religions, for they are backed up by multiple layers of evidentiary proof.

Contemporary Qadian is not always a good place for the actual practice of polemics – due to political vulnerabilities going back to partition, the *Jama'at's* relations with neighbouring communities are noticeably non-confrontational – yet the cultivation of good character is bound up in a

sense of the heroics of disputation. The wife of one elderly man once told me with pride that her husband would, in his youth; “debate (*bahas*) with all kinds of opponents, and not one could give any reply to him!” I later realised how affectionate such a statement was, for it established him as a man to be recognised and admired, a complete man. Likewise, particular presenters on the *Jama’at’s* Satellite TV channels were widely praised for having a mastery over proofs such that opponents would routinely be unable to respond to them with anything other than insults. One presenter in particular was lauded for having singlehandedly pioneered the advancement of the *Jama’at* in the Middle East due to his skill in deploying the proofs of Ahmadiyyat. As the next example shows, performing the proofs of Ahmadiyyat so that they can be easily admired is a central part of what it means to speak well as an Ahmadi.

In late March 2012, the young men of one of Qadian’s neighbourhood divisions organized an open-air question and answer panel. Events such as this, geared toward the edification and religious education of the population, occur on a regular basis and are all but compulsory for Ahmadi men in the town. In this case, a panel of scholars was present on stage, with the audience in neat rows of seating in front of them. The event was recorded by multiple video cameras, and to the side, the Chief Secretary of the Indian *Jama’at* presided over the occasion from an armchair.

The theme of the discussion was the difference between the Ahmadis and other sects, a topic of much intellectual activity for the Ahmadis and their opponents. Crucial to the logic of this event was the self-consciously performative nature of the questions; the way their pointed phrasing belied the questioners' evident knowledge of answer; their precise formulation that facilitated a response in the form of a spectacle of truths. For example, one questioner asked, "in accordance with the Quran and Hadith, can a prophet come after Muhammad? And what kind of prophet is Mirza Ghulam Ahmad?" This question might seem strange to an outsider, yet for those in attendance it signalled an invitation for the panel to retell the Ahmadi argument that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's prophethood does *not* violate Muhammad's station as seal of the prophets⁷. Likewise, another questioner asked, "non-Ahmadis abrogate⁸ many verses from the Qur'an. But the promised Messiah declared that no *ayat* could be abrogated. Please explain this." Again, this was an extremely technical question, but one that provided the panel with a way to discuss arguments known by everybody in the audience and understood to conclusively prove the superiority of Ahmadi theology over that of many rival Sunni groups. All of the questions dealt with minute points of doctrine; all of them were phrased in just the right way to kindle the most spectacular examples of Ahmadi arguments to which no opponent could ever adequately respond. In all this, there was thus nothing that anyone in the audience hadn't heard before.

This event was a presentation of the truths of Ahmadiyyat; a moment in which the Ahmadi community of Qadian offered these truths back upon itself to be seen. In both structure and content, the question and answer panel made reference to a series of televised Q&A sessions conducted by the Fourth *Khalifa*, which are frequently rebroadcast on the community's satellite TV channel and known to all in Qadian. The mimicry of this televised series placed the Qadian event within a particular history; it heightened its formality as a the kind of event well-suited to the exemplary dissemination of Ahmadi doctrine, but most importantly, it drew attention to the nature of the event as a performance of a truth that had its origins not in the creativity of the panel, but in the divine inspiration of their spiritual leader. The exquisite ritual formality of the event underlined this performance as an offering of truth to Qadian.

It was not, however, only the panel who enacted this formality. The audience did likewise, in their neat disciplined rows, in their compliance in asking the right questions, and in their careful listening. The event only worked because the audience fulfilled their obligation to see and receive truth, a fact that was recorded as the cameras panned across them. This is an obligation incumbent upon all Ahmadis in Qadian. It is an obligation placed on the believer every week during Friday sermons, when the manifold proofs of Ahmadiyyat are invariably recalled, and it is an obligation repeated in the everyday retelling of stories that demand the listener witness truth. We see,

crystallised in the performance of the panel and the performance of the audience the central dynamic that in Qadian determines what it means to be a good Ahmadi, and as we shall see, a good person.

It is perhaps not surprising that Qadian's daily religious discourse and its rituals of public edification are structured around a performance of truth to be witnessed, for the Ahmadis belong to a wider culture in which disputation is a complex ethical practice. Polemical argumentation forms a major part of the syllabuses of South Asian madrassas belonging to other sects, such as the Deobandis and Bareilvis (Sikand 2005: 104), who also place great emphasis on the moral aspects of what might otherwise appear to be sterile forms of argumentation (compare Zaman 2007). The idea of disputation as an art to be mastered so that one can reduce opponents to silence also predates modern sectarian divisions in South Asia, and examples can be found in medieval debating cultures (Makdisi 1981: 132). The importance of such argumentative work is no doubt heightened for Ahmadis due to their need to constantly defend their contested *muslimness*, yet there is also a more fundamental distinction to Ahmadi practice, which is that the Ahmadis articulate a vision of moral character structured through heroic polemics. The reason for this is that emulating the character of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad means becoming an effective polemicist. As Naveeda Khan has noted, much sectarian debate in South Asia revolves around concerns of how to ground one's imitation of Muhammad "in proper religious authority" (2006: 244).

For my interlocutors, Ahmad is the individual who most completely realised the sunnah (the exemplary model of life) of Muhammad; it is only by virtue of having been the most faithful and loving follower of Muhammad that Ahmad was able to achieve a shadow (*zill*) prophethood of his own. Ahmad's prophethood thus reinvigorated Islam's core model of exemplary personhood, for Ahmad was the person who most perfectly realised the exemplary model set by Muhammad, and Ahmad's life was structured around a heroics of disputation. Thus, in Qadian the exemplary Islamic model of good character has become entwined with the role of moral polemicist.

We have already seen that the potent truths of Ahmadiyyat are perceived as being capable of silencing opposition, but there are also more fundamental ways in which opponents are understood to fail to live up to the Ahmadi prophetic ideal of exemplary polemics, particularly in their failure to witness truth. It is commonly accepted in Qadian that an Ahmadi could only ever be beaten in debate if his opponent resorts to trickery and deception. In 2011, the *Khalifa* effectively banned individual Ahmadis from keeping a personal Facebook page. This was ostensibly due to the fact that the social network encourages relations between the sexes, and might lead to time wasting. Not everybody saw it in such a light, however, as one student missionary told me that there was a far more serious threat posed by social networks. His concern was that an Ahmadi might publicly post a religious message upon their profile, to which an

opponent would then reply with a hostile allegation (*'itiraaz*) for all to see. I did not immediately understand the problem with this, for in my experience Ahmadi usually found such challenges to be at worst annoying and at best an opportunity to demonstrate the supremacy of their logical proofs. Yet my interlocutor explained that while there is no chance of an Ahmadi being beaten in an actual debate, there is still a danger. What if the Ahmadi were too busy to login to Facebook that day, and the allegation of the opponent remained unanswered on public display? The result, he informed me, could be highly damaging to the *Jama'at*, for non-Ahmadi would start to assume wrongly that the *Jama'at* has no response to such allegations. The problem here was thus not that the proofs of Ahmadiyyat were somehow insufficient to counter any opponent, but that due to a technical lapse, they might appear to be so, and as will become apparent, this could lead to other observers being denied an opportunity to witness potent truths in action.

The assumption behind my interlocutor's story was that opponents all know that Ahmadi arguments are true and potent, and that they live in fear of them. It is for this reason, I was told, that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's books are banned in Deoband. Pakistan's mullahs – clerics who are widely stereotyped as ignorant and backward, and who are often associated with all that is wrong with Pakistan (for a full discussion see Khan 2012) – are seen as particularly guilty of publicly denying a truth they privately fear. I was repeatedly told in Qadian that

those mullahs who call for the persecution and even killing of Ahmadis in Pakistan all know that the arguments of the *Jama'at* cannot be defeated, and it is for this reason that they attack Ahmadiyyat, for the potency of Ahmadi arguments threatens their ability to make money from religion.

What separates the believer from the unbeliever is thus not a knowledge of the potency of divinely-inspired arguments, but the decision of what to do about that knowledge. While others are said to scramble to protect their reputations and financial interests, it is only the believer who publicly bears witness to this potency. These are truths that mould the moral character of the individual, and yet it is only the believer who will publicly recognize this as such.

CREATING AND KNOWING THE GLOBAL JAMA'AT

While rational arguments constitute an important subset of the proofs of Ahmadiyyat, they are by no means the only truths that are witnessed in the daily life of Qadian's believers. Indeed, the *Jama'at* itself, as a material entity stretched across the globe, functioned as the most important manifestation of a truth that my interlocutors both sought to create through their actions and witness for its potency.

One Ahmadi missionary whom I met in India had a very particular job in this regard. He was a member of the *dawat-e-illallah* team, a

proselytising office of the *Jama'at*, and he would spend several months at a time touring India. His mission was to combat opposition to the *Jama'at* wherever it arose. His first task would be to set up a public meeting in the place where agitation against the *Jama'at* was occurring. He would then call the opponents to a meeting, and ask them "what proof do you have? Show us your claim – establish it!" He would thus challenge them to beat him in rational argument, often with great rhetorical flourish: at this point, he told me, if there were ever proof, he would ask for a sword to be put to his neck. But, of course, there would not be. The next step of the process, however, was most revealing. Assuming that the opponents were not dangerous, then, rather than simply be satisfied that he had subdued them into silence with his overpowering proofs, he would instead ask them for permission to organize a joint "peace conference". The media would be invited to this, and there would perhaps even be a press conference. The Ahmadis would then establish medical camps, bookstalls, and even blood donation camps.

These were, of course, not just attempts at dialogue, but also arguments, rendered in a material language of visibility, for the truth of the *Jama'at*. Here, Ahmadi superiority was to be witnessed both in argument, and in the organisational capacity to carry out effective work. Just as Qadian's missionaries simultaneously deploy and witness the arguments and polemics of Ghulam Ahmad, so too did my interlocutors continuously engage in a process of creating and

witnessing the truth of their movement in the organisational unity of the *Jama'at* system.

The most striking example of this is the way in which the globality of the movement comes to be both performed and witnessed as truth of Ahmadiyyat. For many in Qadian, and more broadly in Punjab, labour migration and transnational kinship are facts of life. Yet for Qadian's Ahmadis, the global movement of people is frequently also understood as a religious act. In the 1970s and 1980s a large number of Ahmadis were forced to flee Pakistan due to the government's increasingly hostile attitude toward the *Jama'at*. Retrospectively, however, this was not understood to be a hardship. Rather, it was celebrated for having spread the *Jama'at* ever further across the globe, thus fulfilling the prophecies of Ahmad.

Transnational marriages are also seen to manifest truth through global community. In Qadian, households were connected by marriage to, among other places, Bangladesh, Germany, Indonesia, Mauritius, Nepal, Pakistan, the UK, and the USA, and these marriages were sometimes between older Ahmadi families and foreign converts. Occasionally, my interlocutors spoke very explicitly of these transnational marriages as creating the divine globality through which the truth of the *Jama'at* could be known. One unmarried man in Qadian, already considered old to be a bachelor, decided to create a very specific transnational marriage. In February 2011, a brutal attack

by a mob of at least one thousand people in West Java, Indonesia, left three Ahmadis dead (BBC 2011). Graphic footage of the violence spread online, and in Qadian, my interlocutor watched these events with sadness. Upon discovering that one of the martyred Indonesians had left behind a widow, he thus decided to offer to marry her, an act that is considered significantly meritorious. Having never met her, he nonetheless made inquiries with the Indonesian *Jama'at* about whether she would want to marry again. The process was long and complicated, and also involved taking permission from the *Khalifa* and asking for his prayers. The marriage, the groom insisted, was a purely spiritual union. Finally, the bride arrived for the wedding in Qadian, with a small delegation of other Indonesians. Her family had persuaded her to buy an expensive new dress for the wedding, but during the flight, of the 20 bags the Indonesians had with them, the bag containing this dress was the only one to get lost in transit. The groom interpreted this not as a loss, but rather as a divine sign that this wedding was not to be a worldly affair, but rather a pure spiritual union. His wife, he told me, had come only for Qadian.

Hardship incurred in moving far from one's home is often understood in terms of manifesting the global *Jama'at*. Those who have dedicated their lives to Ahmadiyyat are given little choice about where the *Jama'at* posts them. In India, this meant that many non-Punjabis were posted to Qadian. In spite of Qadian's spiritual station, it was rarely their first choice of home, for it is hot, dusty, and lacking good local

schooling. To express any dissatisfaction, however, would be highly taboo, for duty should be seen to prevail. I spoke to a southerner, who seemed deeply upset about spending the rest of his life in Punjab, yet he justified this sacrifice by drawing attention to the way in which it was making prophecy visible; “it is prophesied that Qadian will extend to the river Beas. So this will come true, through families settling here from all over the world”. Hardship and sacrifice (*qirbani*) were seen as a necessary aspect of any life spent in the service of the *Jama’at*; people would have to give up worldly riches and leave family far behind in order to serve the global community. But as the quote above illustrates, this sacrifice is never just a process of personal transformation; it is also a way of making the *Jama’at* into an object to be seen.

Migration and travel thus fulfil the prophecies that prove Ahmadiyyat, yet they also provide dispersed vantage points from which believers can then appreciate this proof. The question of whether a peripatetic life can lead to a heightened sense of community has been discussed, for example, by Anderson (1991) in his consideration of bureaucratic pilgrimages. Eickelman and Piscatori ask the question of whether there is any “direct, causal relationship” between experiences of travel and a sense of being Muslim (1990: 16). More recently, Marsden (2009b) has described regional travel undertaken by his Chitrali Muslim interlocutors as a moral practice premised upon the development of attachments to specifically local forms of

heterogeneity. In Qadian there is certainly a relationship between the ethical flourishing of the individual and travel, but it is neither direct nor causal.

My interlocutors – particularly the young men of Qadian – found great pleasure in touring India. Yet almost all travel within the country involved a movement through the *Jama'at*, with individuals staying at Ahmadi mission houses, which varied from the large mosques with attached living quarters in cities, to simple one-room huts in rural areas. To move was to experientially recreate the truth of the dispersed, expansive and unified *Jama'at*. Moreover, while the religious landscape of India fascinated my interlocutors, this was because it opened up a space for observing the heterogeneity of Hindu and other Muslim groups, whose divisions could then be compared unfavourably with the global unity of the *Jama'at*.

Much the same was true for foreign travel. For Indians earning the salaries of *Jama'at* employees in Qadian (approximately ₹ 5000 in 2011), visiting the West to see relatives and attend *jalsa salanas* is extremely difficult. Yet many did just this, particularly so as to attend the *International Jalsa*, which is held every year in the UK, and for which the *Jama'at* in London offers some visa sponsorship. There are financial reasons why Indian Ahmadis in Europe will spend all their time moving through the landscape of the *Jama'at*, indeed, even within India the practice of staying in mission houses when travelling was for

financial reasons as much as it was religious ones. Yet I was nonetheless intrigued by the extent to which foreign travel, when understood as a cultivating experience, occurred as a movement through the *Jama'at*; a tour through industrial towns usually overlooked by tourists, which nonetheless have sizeable Ahmadi mosques. When I was visiting my own family in the UK during the summer of 2011, I met some friends from Qadian who had come to London for the International *Jalsa*. They were supposed to travel around the UK after this, but when the *Khalifa's* mother died on 29th July, all plans were put on hold so that those present could be near the *Khalifa* in this time of mourning. For Ahmadis from Qadian, the UK was not a tourist destination in any traditional sense, but rather a place to experience proximity to the leader who unifies the movement.

The act of travel was not a direct cause of moral development but rather a step toward the realisation of a moral self, for it was a process of understanding the global unity of the *Jama'at*. Labour migrations, exile, transnational marriage, and travel all constantly remade an image of globality that is then placed before the believer. And as I discovered from personal experience, one is expected to respond to this image, for many in Qadian became increasingly exasperated that although I had lived in Qadian for 15 months and observed the global unity of the movement between London and Qadian, I was still failing to bear witness to the global *Jama'at* as paradigmatic proof of Ahmadiyyat.

This is a potent truth, for in Qadian it is seen to change who we are. Why do I say this? It is because becoming a believer means recognising that these truths cannot be denied. Qadian's Ahmadis rarely express their religious commitments in terms of belief or faith. Instead, the key verb was to understand (*samajhna*) the religion. Conversion stories were stories of developing understanding. Becoming Ahmadi was always narrated, post facto, as a process of coming to understand the truths of the religion – both the abstract arguments and the material realisations of truth in the form of the global *Jama'at*. When I was in the field, I was never asked if I had come to believe in Ahmadiyyat, but always if I had come to understand it. Yet this notion of understanding does not equate in any simple way with knowing, for as we saw in the preceding examples, even the most hardened opponents are thought to secretly know that Ahmadi truth cannot be denied. Likewise, I was rather confusingly told that some Ahmadis who had been living in Qadian for decades were morally lacking because they still did not truly understand the system of the *Jama'at*. This seems odd only when we realise that understanding refers not just to abstract comprehension, but also to a total restructuring of one's ethical life around the realisation that these are truths that cannot be denied, and that demand witnessing. I once asked a young friend of mine how he had felt upon the death of the Fourth *Khalifa*, and he replied that it had been a strange experience for him. He was perhaps 12 or 13 in 2003 when the Fourth *Khalifa* passed away, and although people were

crying all around him, he could not really comprehend the cause of their grief. It was only gradually, as he matured, that he said that he began truly to understand the importance of *Khilafat*. Thus, years later, he one day found himself weeping when he finally understood the significance of the death of the Fourth *Khalifa*. For those who have understood *Khilafat*, the *Khalifa* is more than just a guru; he is the manifestation of the unity of the Ahmadiyya *Jama'at*, and thus the most potent symbol of the *Jama'at*'s superiority over its opponents.

Understanding is about one's entire epistemological stance; it is about one's ability not just to see truth, but to publicly bear witness to that truth's potent effect upon the self, for the very existence of the *Jama'at* is a fact that imposes an obligation upon the world to respond in an ethical fashion.

RESPONSIBILITY AND ETHICS

We have seen that in Qadian, good character results from publicly bearing witness to a potent ethical truth. The question of how we are to understand this analytically points to more general complexities in the anthropological study of theisms. Two possible approaches are considered here. The first, most influentially demonstrated by Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2005) is to stress the agentive capacity of the individual to engage in reflexive self-fashioning. The second approach, exemplified in the study of Islam by Mittermaier's work

(2011, 2012a), is to take seriously the agentic capacity that a metaphysical other has to cultivate individuals. I suggest that neither approach can wholly grasp what is happening in Qadian, primarily because of their excessive analytical focus upon agency.

Mahmood's model of ethics is important for having broadened our anthropological understanding of agency by delinking it from a progressive politics of liberation, and showing that those engaged in an ethical project of passivity can be acting in an agentic fashion (2005: 14). While this model of self-cultivation is effective in showing how people agentially work upon themselves, it remains less effective in accounting for situations in which people understand themselves to be changed through contact with compelling moral otherness, for example, the potent truths of Ahmadiyyat. Mahmood's description of ethical self-cultivation is at heart an Aristotelian model that enables the secular discipline of anthropology to engage with a religious process of ethical becoming without ever having to deal with questions of how relationships to sacred others alter the self (by comparison, see Luhrmann 2012).

I am not the first to point out that Aristotelian self-cultivation is an inadequate analytical tool for thinking about the ethical practices of many Muslim (and other) groups (see, for example, Anderson 2011). Mittermaier provides an alternative in her call for an ethics of the 'acted-upon' self (Mittermaier 2012). Like Mahmood, Mittermaier

writes about Muslims in Cairo, and yet her focus is upon revelatory dreams, which are understood to present themselves to people, unbidden. Her model is one in which an ethics is possible precisely because it originates from beyond the individual. The importance of this account is that it moves us away from a subject-centred Aristotelian model of ethics (2012: 260), which has in recent years been applied by many anthropologists to ethics in general, but is in fact confusing for those situations where people strive to be ‘a *patient* who is acted upon’ (Mittermaier 2011: 86). Her understanding of dreams is also purposefully non-Freudian, in that she ultimately privileges the agency of the dream over that of the dreamer. Dream stories, she tells us, ‘exceed the logic of self cultivation’, and they open up the idea that people are being constituted by experiences of alterity as much as they are cultivating them (2012: 5). Indeed, for Mittermaier, it is precisely this quality of alterity – this ability to ‘decenter the self-contained self’ (2011: 171) – that makes dreams both ethical and political.

This analysis speaks to my ethnography of Qadian. Like dreams, the potent proofs of Ahmadiyyat are said to present themselves unbidden to subjects. Moreover, as in Mittermaier’s discussion of dream visions, these potent proofs place an obligation to respond upon the individual⁹. Why, then, should my analysis not simply follow my interlocutors in seeing the act of witnessing as a practice of patient-hood that allows for the potent truths of Ahmadiyyat to constitute the subject? Such an approach has the advantage of appearing to take

seriously the metaphysical world of those in Qadian. And yet, it would do so only superficially, and ultimately, it would obscure the actual ethical work of being an Ahmadi.

To develop this point, it is worth introducing an idea from Laidlaw, namely that a focus on responsibility – as something with a genealogy that is embedded in historically instituted practices and relations – is often more analytically productive than a focus on agency (Laidlaw 2010, 2014). He argues that analytical conceptions of agency, particularly as found in ‘practice theory’ or Actor-Network Theory, distract us from the ethnographic insight that for the people we study, the question of *what* has happened is inseparable from and partly constituted by our judgements about its ethical character (Laidlaw 2014: 185). In fact, determining causal significance is never just a factual matter, for an account’s explanatory power is always linked to the question of whom it is for. Drawing on Bernard Williams, Laidlaw seeks to show how negotiations of responsibility are always also a question of what has been done. And thus, he argues that the question of when a person’s actions might be considered their own is never just a question of agency and structure: it is also a question of ‘blame and responsibility, as an aspect of the relational processes whereby stretches, phases, or stages of people’s ongoing conduct are interpreted as acts for which distinct agents (of varying shape and size) are accountable’ (Laidlaw 2014: 197).

This is thus a move toward an analytical framework that attends to the way in which questions of blame and responsibility are always also ethical decisions. The question becomes; how do our interlocutors establish responsibility? It is worth asking what this might mean for an analytically rigorous anthropology of theisms, particularly with regard to the question, raised by both my own ethnography and that of Mittermaier, as to whether divine truths or visitational dreams might be seen to have agency.

While my interlocutors in Qadian see the truth of Ahmadiyyat as always agentive, the difference that they insist separates them from their opponents is the fact that they have chosen, unlike those opponents, to recognize this transformative potential of Ahmadi truths. If we as analysts take as the starting point of our empirical description the notion that these truths have agency, we miss the fact that such a state of affairs is always the result of an ethical decision. Attempting to do our interlocutors justice by taking seriously their view of the world thus ends up reducing the ethical quality of their actions. If, instead of stressing the agency of either the subject or the potent truths, we begin to think about how our interlocutors are assigning responsibility, then the actual ethical work being undertaken becomes clearer, for this ethical work *is the decision* to recognize the agentive power of truth; in short, to see this truth as being responsible for a given state of affairs. For the Ahmadis, ethics is thus about

making a decision to see divine truth - and thus ultimately God - as being responsible for one's own ethical potentiality.

RESPONSIBILITY AND COHERENCE

Turning from agency to responsibility can also help explain why in Qadian, good character is above all judged by one's decision to attest to Ahmadi truth being indomitable. Within recent anthropological studies of Islam, ethical projects such as the one I describe, which value total coherence and discipline, have been the object of much debate, one suggestion being that they are as much a fiction of anthropological analysis as they are an ethnographic reality (e.g. Janson 2014; Marsden 2009a). Most relevant is Schielke's argument that Mahmood's focus on the supposedly singularly disciplined lives of Salafi activists covers up the multiplicities and ambivalences of their everyday lives (Mahmood 2005; Schielke 2009). Schielke argues that the picture painted by Mahmood of Muslim self-cultivation is something of an analytical fantasy; a product of her concentration on the lives of activists, and her confusion of goals with outcomes. People may try to live by a doctrine that 'has as its declared aim the abolition of ambivalence and the imposition of clarity' (2009: S32), but his ethnography shows that ultimately such efforts lead to greater fragmentation of the individual. This happens as people find themselves torn between opposing teleologies of the subject.

In Qadian, people cannot simply slip in and out of the *Jama'at* in the manner in which Schielke describes his interlocutors' flirtations with Salafi lifestyles. The *Jama'at* is the only major employer of Ahmadis in the town and there are a number of mechanisms in place to ensure people's continued participation in community events. That does not, however, mean that there is a sense that everybody is always acting correctly. In fact, discourse in Qadian is imbued with the idea that the town is in a state of irreversible moral decline. At the heart of this discourse is a sense of isolation from the wellspring of *Khilafat*: Qadian, having been separated from its spiritual leader for over 60 years, is now drifting slowly away from the prophetic ideal. The town, I was told, was now full of money-grabbing individuals with little sense of the true meaning of the *Jama'at*. On several occasions, the head of the community in Qadian made quite clear that he was granting me extended permission to work in Qadian only because I was keeping good company and not investigating the less-than-ideal behaviour of some Ahmadis in Qadian. Corruption was, moreover, not limited to marginal Ahmadis. People spoke privately of a rot within the *Jama'at* hierarchy caused by officials who abused positions of power for financial gain. Yet this talk of decline was accompanied by another, contradictory discourse. As often as I was advised to be wary of personal morals in Qadian, I would be advised to look to Qadian as an exemplary place; to witness Qadian as a manifestation of the truth of Ahmadiyyat. The same religious bureaucracy that was said to be collapsing under the weight of nepotism was also presented to me for

witnessing as an exemplary, divinely inspired system. In these moments, Qadian was heralded as the most peaceful place on earth, and its people the most spiritual.

How could two such contradictory ideas coexist? One answer is to follow Schielke and conclude that the project of perfection espoused by my interlocutors is an idealised fiction that hides a reality of ambiguity and multiplicity. Doing so makes much anthropological sense, for insightful ethnography is usually seen to emphasize the heterogeneous and the multiple (for a fine example in a recent study of a Muslim society see Marsden 2005). This is no surprise, for if we take agency – that is, everything that people and things do (in a very Latourian sense) – as our proper object of study, then multiplicities will overwhelm. Charting networks and mapping agencies will always produce an analysis that in its completeness makes a mockery of the ethical projects that our interlocutors espouse. But does determining who did what with ever greater detail really help us to understand what matters for our interlocutors (Laidlaw 2010: 147)? Or does it lead to a confusion of the deep and the hidden with the authentic?¹⁰ The important point is that not all discontinuities are seen as equally threatening in Qadian. When, we have to ask, are people held accountable for major moral failure? Both Ahmadis and the opponents of the *Jama'at* are routinely held accountable for two major faults.

The first fault is being unable to performatively enact truth in such a way that its witnessing can lead to the development of moral character. An obvious consequence of this is that minor instances of moral failure in Qadian only become truly problematic when they shatter the exemplary image of the town. As one young Ahmadi smoking a secret cigarette once confided in me, “the problem is not that I am doing this; it is that I am doing it in front of you”. There are also more serious ways in which the inability to present a truth that can be witnessed comes to be seen as symptomatic of the moral failure of the *Jama’at*’s opponents. A friend in Qadian once showed me an anti-Ahmadi video on his mobile phone, which was made by a well-known Internet opponent of the *Jama’at*. My friend was dismissive of the video, not just because of its content, but because it had been produced in such a way that demonstrated its maker did not understand how to engage correctly in disputation. “What is the proper way for a person to make a criticism?” he asked, before continuing, “they should first call a press conference, and gather people together, and say, ‘we will be making these allegations, and then backing them up with such-and-such data within a given period of time’.” In other words, the opponent lacked more than just strong arguments; he also lacked a sense of how to performatively enact truth in the world. Absent from this opponent’s performance were precisely those qualities of formality and documentability that made the question and answer session with which we began this chapter a thing to behold.

The second, and perhaps most intolerable, fact about opponents was not the fact that they persecute Ahmadis, but that they do so in spite of their knowledge of the potency of Ahmadi proofs. Among the global elite of the movement whom I met in London or as they travelled through Qadian, it was standard to refer to the persecution of Ahmadis by reference to an international discourse of religious rights and freedoms. In India, however, especially among some older members of the *Jama'at*, a different discourse dominated. Instead of feeling outrage because the religious freedoms of Ahmadis are denied in Pakistan, they felt outrage at the fact that Ahmadis there are denied the ability to speak the truth. People would thus recount Pakistan's 1974 hearings against the Ahmadis not as violations of rights and freedoms, but as violations against truth. For these people, the scandal was not about free speech; the scandal was that the Ahmadis were able to prove everything they said, and yet knowing this, the Pakistani government continued to deny this truth and persecute the *Jama'at*.

These are the major moral faults in Qadian, and understanding this enables us to see how coherent, disciplined moral character is produced out of a process in which the performative manifestation of truth establishes criteria and obligations against which a person can subsequently be held accountable (Lambek 2013). Ahmadi deployments of proofs and arguments are, to draw on Lambek's use of Walsh (2002), rituals which not only fulfil responsibility, but also produce it (Lambek 2013: 840; see also Rappaport 1999). My

interlocutors performatively manifest the truth of Ahmadiyyat – for example through heroic polemics or prophecy-fulfilling migration – and this produces an obligation to be a particular kind of witness. Being a consistently good Ahmadi is a question of accountability over time to this obligation.

For those in Qadian, coherent moral character is a question of one's accountability to truth over time, and thus it is not simply a question of the sum total of one's actions. Understanding this means shifting our analysis away from agency, and instead looking at the complex working out of the responsibilities and accountabilities that emerge from of being a witness to divine truth. It means understanding how the performance of truth might create obligations over time, and why this, rather than any sum total of one's actions, is the basis of being a good Ahmadi.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

My interlocutors understand their ethical work to involve both presentation of truth to the world, and a witnessing of that truth. For Qadian's Ahmadis, witnessing the truth means recognising its capacity to shape a subject and place obligation upon that subject. If anthropologists have, in recent years, run into difficulties in their attempts to understand ethical relations of submission to a metaphysical other, I suggest that such relationships might best be

analysed in terms of the decisions being made on the part of the believer about the nature of responsibility within the world.

This style of analysis has a long yet buried history in anthropological studies of Muslim societies. Ethnographers of spirit possession in particular have had to deal with the analytical challenge of accounting for beings who are clearly said to impact the world, but about whom anthropologists must be professionally agnostic. Crapanzano's (1973) study of the Hamadsha is perhaps the best example. Whilst it is often dismissed for its psychoanalytical approach (el-Zein 1977), it can instead be read as an ethnography of a ritual process in which an individual comes to make an ethical decision to accept that another is responsible for what is done to them, and that they are then subsequently obliged to respond to this other. To understand spirit possession, Crapanzano asks about neither the agency of the spirit nor the agency of the possessed, but rather about the ways in which rituals mediate social distributions of responsibility.

To focus on responsibility in this way is thus to adopt an anthropological approach that neither effaces our interlocutors' metaphysics, nor dismisses their projects of perfection as illusory. Instead, it can elucidate the ways in which people understand themselves to be changed by relationships to a metaphysical other, which are so often characteristic of theisms.

NOTES

¹ A schism occurred in 1914 due to controversy over the election of Ahmad's son as the second *Khalifa*. A dissenting group was established in Lahore, although their numbers remain very small, and none are to be found in Qadian.

² British Library: IOR/L/PJ/7/12415.

³ Census of India, 2011.

⁴ Because of the strict nature of public gender segregation in Qadian, my interactions with women were always extremely limited, and consequently, this paper focuses exclusively on the male population of the town.

⁵ <http://www.jalsasalana.org/etiquette.html>, accessed on 08/09/2012.

⁶ The Urdu terms *dala'il* and *sabut* are both used, although it is not unusual to hear the English word *proof*.

⁷ *Khatam an-nabiyin* (seal of the prophets) is a title given to Muhammad in the Qur'an (33:40), often understood to imply that Muhammad was the final prophet. Ahmadis, by contrast, argue that Muhammad as seal is not inconsistent with the existence of another prophet following within Muhammad's prophethood.

⁸ *Naskh*, or abrogation, is a major theological issue in Islam, regarding the question of how to deal with seemingly contradictory verses in the Qur'an.

⁹ Mittermaier describes how the imperative to visit a saint's shrine can come not from personal desire, but 'from an Elsewhere' (2011: 163).

¹⁰ A notion that has long been challenged in anthropological writing on Islam (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1986; Deeb 2006).

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